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ABSTRACT

The role of a rural university in the delivery of special education services to exceptional children is explained in relation to four categories: academic services, in-service training of special education teachers, consulting services to local education agencies, and clinical assessment of children. Difficulties are described and possible solutions are suggested. (IM)

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THE ROLE OF A RURAL UNIVERSITY IN THE DELIVERY OF SPECIAL SERVICES TO EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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The role of a rural university in the delivery of special services to exceptional children and youth is a tremendous responsibility. In order to examine this responsibility within the context of a coherent structure, an attempt will be made to arbitrarily divide the service areas into the following four broad categories; academic, in-service, consulting, and clinical. For purposes of this article, a rural university is defined as an institution of higher education that is located in or around a city of no greater than 25,000 population with a special education training program in one or more exceptionalities.

Academic Services

To state that the primary purpose of a teacher training program is to prepare teachers may appear to be somewhat oversimplified. However, this objective is of such a critical nature that its emphasis should be foremost. With the relative paucity of special education programs in rural areas at the present time, the amount of institutional resources invested in both quantity and quality of teacher training must be increased. This is especially true in the high incidence exceptionalities, such as mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, and emotional disturbance. The larger, more urban university can continue to provide training for areas of low incidence until supply-demand ratios began to equalize. Teachers trained in urban universities are frequently reluctant to apply for employment in rural areas. Vergason (1973) suggested the use of a voucher system as a means of attracting teachers to rural areas. Experienced teachers from metropolitan areas where teacher surplusses exist would be given vouchers that would provide

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reimbursement for travel and other expenses if teachers were to successfully gain employment in predefined rural areas.

The difficulty of attracting qualified teachers to rural areas is a problem of major proportion. The problem is even more pronounced when viewed from the perspective of recruiting practices. Rural school systems generally cannot afford active recruiting programs (like their urban counterparts) and have to rely primarily on a selection from those who happen to apply. Recruiting certified teachers to rural areas is aggravated when a prudent superintendent attempts to eliminate poor teachers by requiring them to return to school for certification in special education. This same superintendent is often reluctant to mention this possibility to his more successful teachers, for fear they might decide on an early retirement.

A possible solution appears to involve recruiting prospective graduate students from established teacher populations that presently exist in rural areas, with the expectation of their returning home upon graduation. A supporting alternative (discussed later in this paper) is to provide in-service training to teachers that are presently employed in rural areas. Undergraduate students appear to gravitate toward larger population centers while graduate students are more likely to return to the rural areas, particularly when they were born and raised in the locale. In view of the foregoing discussion, the role of the rural university should receive increasing visibility as attempts are being made on a national level to provide appropriate services for <u>all</u> exceptional children.

The need for training special education teachers of a cross-categorical nature for rural areas was exhorted by Harris and Mahan (1975). They stated that teachers should be prepared to work with children who exhibit a variety of learning and behavioral anomilies. The acquisition of

pertinent teaching competencies amenable to the needs of both the regular and special classroom situation should be the major concern of undergraduate preparation programs in special education. At the graduate level, the teacher education program should offer specialization courses on the predominant handicapping conditions being served in the public schools. Offering graduate courses in more than one area of exceptionality is often difficult for economic reasons. When students are in need of specialized courses not currently being offered on the local campus, the student could be given the opportunity to take the courses at another institution of higher education as a transient student. One suggested approach to this problem is a type of statewide consortium that is presently functioning in several states.

Urban universities are frequently requested to offer field courses in rural areas. The primary justification has been to "bring the service to the people", when in reality the institution is usually attempting to generate as high a credit-hour production as possible (for competition in state funding). The quality of the field courses (which frequently expand into "unofficial programs") is questionable. Lack of library resources, proper advisement, adequate facilities, and increased numbers of adjunct faculty are only some of the limitations. Therefore if a rural university is capable of offering a teacher preparation program, encouragement by state and federal agencies with regard to differential funding patterns should be an area of priority.

In-Service

One of the most valuable services a rural university can perform for local public schools is conducting in-service training programs for special education teachers. The resources of the institution can serve to keep

teachers abreast of recent developments and trends in the field. Most teachers (administrators, also), especially those who have been "retreaded" from other areas of education, can benefit from in-service programs relative to appropriate topics of interest.

Because the departmental staff in most rural universities is generally small, an attempt should be made to utilize expertise from other departments (Rehabilitation, Psychology, Sociology, etc.). This interdisciplinary approach is generally more successful in small institutions where a minimum of professional jealousies and administrative logistics tend to exist.

The need for professional development of the faculty in rural teacher education programs is another area of critical need. Because of the geographic isolation and the relative minimum of staff members, the amount of professional interaction that occurs is frequently less than optimal. The problem is compounded when the travel budget is small. In-service training grants for college faculty in special education that have terminal degrees are presently being awarded to several universities through a Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) funded project known as RETOOL. The original request for such a project was made through the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children (TED of CEC).

In the College of Education in most rural universities, the emphasis is on teaching. Research, service to the community, professional writing, and consultant work, may be permitted (or even appreciated) but have not been traditional areas of concern. Although this image may have been ameliorated somewhat in recent years, utilization of faculty resources in a more eclectic manner is needed. Otherwise a degree of complacency may

become an undesirable component of the institutional culture.

In recent years, the State of Alabama has had two BEH funded projects designed to produce in-service training models. One was referred to as the Multiplier In-service Project developed jointly by the Area of Special Education at the University of Alabama and the Program for Exceptional Children and Youth in the Alabama State Department of Education. The program, which is no longer in existence, attempted to train small teams of special education teachers, regular teachers, and building principals from selected school systems to return home and share what they had learned about special education with their colleagues. The other model in-service delivery system is Jacksonville State University's project "Outreach", which provides in-service training to fourteen rural school systems in the Appalachian region of Northeast Alabama.

Consulting Services

A rural university has the responsibility for providing consulting services to local education agencies. The nature of these consulting services may vary in accordance with staff expertise, available time, and the degree of public relations being promoted by everyone involved. Three of the most urgent needs of local education agencies in rural areas is professional development, inservice training, and evaluation.

Clinical Services

Another important component of the delivery system in rural areas is that of clinical assessment of exceptional children. Requests for assistance to provide psychoeducational evaluation are frequent. This is one of the most valuable adjunct services that the special education staff in a rural university can provide for a local education agency. Occasionally an exceptional child will pose an especially difficult problem

pursuant to assessment. In these unusual cases (which really aren't so unusual), a diagnostic team composed of local school personnel, university staff members, and other professionals from the community could examine the problem and perhaps prescribe appropriate treatment.

This article has attempted to develop a model role for the rural university in relation to its potential for delivery of special services to the exceptional child. The ultimate role and services delivered will be largely determined by the professional attitude and cooperative spirit of all individuals involved in the delivery system. Professional biases must be overcome in order to maximize the effectiveness of the delivery system. Through the mutual exchange of ideas, techniques, and services, by responsible and concerned professionals, special needs of exceptional children and youth can be adequately met.

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